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The Unlearning Organisation

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The Unlearning Organisation: Cultural Devolution in Scotland 1967-2017

Neil Mulholland

in Harding, Anna (ed.) *Artists in the City: SPACE in '68 and Beyond*

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As I write, self-determination is paramount to the agendas of both the Scottish and British Governments. The May 2017 local authority elections and the UK General Election in June, however, concern radically incompatible conceptions of self-determination. Tory self-determination is indistinguishable from the authoritarian nationalism of Pax Britannica (1815–1914). It promises a companionless return to neorealist international relations; the anarchical system of sovereign states enshrined by the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), from which the then United Kingdom of Scotland and England and its Empire grew ¹. In Scotland, self-determination embraces the post-World-War-II Pax Europaea: fluid states of interdependence, asymmetric layers of authority, each of which share sovereignty with the others. The signature of the Treaty of Rome, just over 60 years ago, determined that neomedieval international cooperation would supersede the anarchic neorealism that had led to numerous European wars.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) Government (2007-) and the broader YES Scotland independence campaign have largely consolidated Pax Europaea's neomedievalist vision of interdependent self-determination over the past few years. But this vision is part of a movement that has much broader and deeper cultural roots across Britain and the Anglosphere. Indeed, SPACE is a key player in the story of what Michael Gardiner called The Cultural Roots of

¹ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

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British Devolution.² At this moment in time, it is crucial we remember that the values of interdependent self-determination embodied by SPACE run entirely counter to the authoritarian nationalism of the Tories.

We can begin to understand something of the significant role SPACE has played in the development of the global infrastructure for contemporary art by observing that its inception came at a pivotal point in the governance of the arts in Britain. In 1967, public subsidy of the arts in Scotland was devolved from the Arts Council of Great Britain (ACGB, 1945–94) in London to Edinburgh, when the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) replaced the ACGB's Scottish Committee (1947–67).

SAC was a largely autonomous branch of ACGB Colonial Office in London. It championed Scotland's national interests in Scotland, while loyally following John Maynard Keynes' arm's length/'few but roses' vision for the ACGB (ironically Keynes had vociferously opposed administrative devolution of the arts to Scotland). Like its ACGB overlord, SAC espoused an Arnoldian view of culture as unitary and idealist. A Cultural NHS, SAC inherited something of the Committee for Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA, 1940-46) welfare-state meliorism, situating its surgeries closer to its patients, directly hosting exhibitions in galleries and community centres scattered in Scotland's most sparsely populated areas. The subsidiary approach was a

² Michael Gardiner, *The Cultural Roots of British Devolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

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bitter-sweet victory for cultural nationalism in Scotland. Scotland's 'artistic traditions' would be determined by branch managers of the Keynesian project, its vernaculars officially sanctioned by the (much more refined) British Union State.

The foundation of SAC directly coincided with a period of heightened political nationalism in Scotland that was flamed by the international counterculture of the late '60s. Younger artists rejected the conservatism of Scotland's old artist-initiated academies such as The Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh (1826–), The Royal Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts (1861–), and The Society of Scottish Artists (1891–). Instead, they established their own, more participatory, citizen-led organisations such as the Glasgow League of Artists (founded 1968).³

Such organisations took two distinct forms:

1. **Sites and Systems of Distribution:** Artist-run Initiatives (ARIs)

In the late 19th century, Scottish industrialists established numerous private galleries, a number of which were instrumental in nurturing European modernism. By the '50s, Scotland had grown conservative in social attitudes, so much so that the Conservative and Unionist Party won a majority of Scottish votes in the 1959 election. The ambitious collectors who had bankrolled Scottish modernism, such as the art dealer

³ An artist-led organisation that pursued more socially-engaged and political work than the SSA. It was also active in setting up studio spaces.

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Alexander Reid and the publisher Walter Blackie, were not being replenished. The dominant system of distribution came in the moribund form of Scotland's old artist-initiated academies (which monopolised Scotland's four art schools). This Académie Française approach was not particularly conducive to avant-gardism. With no dealers or patrons stepping into this fray, contemporary artists were compelled to establish their own galleries and advocate on behalf of their peers. Hence, from 1957 to 1966, Scotland witnessed the rise of what would become foundational independent artist-run initiatives (ARIs): 57 Gallery (1957), Jim Haynes Paperback Bookshop and Gallery (1959), Traverse Theatre (1963) and Demarco Gallery (1966), all in Edinburgh, and Charing Cross Gallery (1963) in Glasgow. The Edinburgh ARIs, notably, all shared an interdisciplinary commitment to the arts: visual art, writing and theatre. They prefigured the post-industrial, neomedieval discourses on self-determination that would dominate *Scottish International* magazine (1968–74) and which should be considered an integral part of the ARI counterculture. Collectively, such ARIs initiated what was a global shift from modernism towards what we still call 'contemporary art'.

2. Systems of Production: Studios and Workshops

1. Post-war Scottish modernism was diasporic; most ambitious artists migrated. Without fabrication facilities, artists were unable to work and so left Scotland to establish viable working studios elsewhere. By the end of the '60s, the more overtly countercultural ARIs had reconnected Scottish artists with the world, affirming a global community of purpose.

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Dialogues were established with international peers, including the founders of AIR, SPACE and Acme in London and The Institute for Art and Urban Resources (PS1) in New York, and tactics and strategies for self-determination were shared. In Gallowgate, Docklands, Queens, Hackney and Leith, the post-Fordist downturn of the early '70s heralded the rise of the studio loft. In 1977, artists organised in Scotland's nascent industrial wastelands, building the affordable, and democratically accountable, Working Artists' Studio Provision Scotland (WASPS) in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Dundee and Glasgow. WASPS perfectly complemented Edinburgh Printmakers (1967–), Glasgow Print Studio (1972–), Peacock Printmakers, Aberdeen (1974–) and Dundee Printmakers Workshop (1977–98). Large-scale fabrication finally arrived with the foundation of the Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Lumsden in 1979.

Studios, workshops and ARIs were reciprocally intertwined. Artists practised in studios and workshops, exhibited and wrote about each other's work. As new sites and systems of distribution multiplied, demand grew for new sites and systems of production. The systems of production (studios and workshops) supplied the systems of distribution (ARIs). As the number and scale of ARIs grew, capacity was built for more artists to live and work in Scotland. Both forms of organisation were eager to gain the vital financial support of the new SAC.

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SAC, however, had different long-term plans for the visual arts, preferring to establish and run its own galleries: Travelling Gallery, Edinburgh Charlotte Square Gallery, Glasgow Blythswood Square Gallery. Most of these galleries were in the salubrious 'salon' style of the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, which had resided at Inverleith House since 1960, and the private galleries of Dundas Street (Edinburgh) and St Vincent Street (Glasgow). While Scotland's ARIs nurtured dynamic participatory democracies, SAC administered with the cold dead hand of the British civil service.

Unlike the National Galleries of Scotland (NGS), SAC galleries were distributed but not devolved; they were all run directly from Charlotte Square in Edinburgh. In this sense, the embryonic Scottish patron state took a very long time to establish a more arm's length relationship with its benefactors, the perception in London being that there were no worthy arts benefactors in Scotland, that SAC had to invent, incubate and manage them. This patronising and agonistic attitude was, in hindsight, folly.

One of the most significant galleries in mid 20th century Scotland had emerged a decade prior to SAC: the 57 Gallery. Co-founded by a group of painters led by John Houston, this became 'New 57', based in Rose Street from 1961 to 1974, before resettling above SAC Gallery Edinburgh (the upstairs floor of what is now the Fruitmarket Gallery). 57 Gallery's constitution established a highly influential model of having an unpaid committee of six who were able to serve no more than two years as directors. They formed a committee for the contemporary visual arts and supported lay members of

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their organisation, who all paid a small fee to cover the ARI's running costs. They were accountable to the collective's members. To avoid conflicts of interest, the directors could not exhibit or promote their own work. This model has been copied across Scotland by Collective (Edinburgh), Transmission (Glasgow), Generator (Dundee), Embassy (Edinburgh), and it has spread to Catalyst (Belfast) and 126 (Galway) in Ireland. It is, by now, such an established form of collective artistic endeavour that we may call it a DIY doxa. While this form of participatory democracy is by no means exceptional to Scotland, Scotland is internationally celebrated for its dogged pursuit, and so is all too often naïvely mythologised as a Shangri-la by artists living elsewhere.

The doxa was, and remains, important for four reasons:

Firstly, it is a fluid palimpsest rather than a fixed 'statute'. Voluntary committee-run constitutions are based on precedent, but they are all a little different. Each ARI copies, then rewrites the constitution of a previous ARI. The constitution develops, adjusts to fit its situation, and flourishes. The doxa, therefore, is not absolute; it is an adaptive, elective affinity.

Secondly, the doxa invites a form of cultural amnesia that is germane to contemporaneity. ARIs that consent to being governed by the DIY doxa completely change their DNA every three years. The constitutional founders are quickly forgotten, thus mitigating against the formation of embodied institutional memory. Rapid volunteer turnover ensures that the doxa is not

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constantly subjected to institutionkritik; it remains 'hidden'. The precarity this ensures is seen to nourish and enhance cultural innovation. The effects on artistic programming, the intense dynamism of production, are what is most visible, and attractive, to audiences. This is a self-fulfilling prophecy that accounts for the further palimpsests of the doxa.

Thirdly, the doxa is a powerful ethical code that binds, and offers a form of self-empowerment to, local artistic communities. The doxa is virulent among younger contemporary artists because it is a means of defining and maintaining social relations and status through the act of reciprocal participation ('gift-bonding'). To receive recognition from your artistic peers consigns you to counter-gifting within your own network. The DIY doxa, therefore, operates – initially at least – as a localised system of establishing value among peers within a specific community of practice.

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Finally, and following on from the previous point, providing that artists gift their output to the local commons, they are free to use its open resources. Thus, distinct communities of practice (local variants of the DIY doxa) are reciprocally tied to one another via a transnational commonwealth of networks. This commonwealth, simultaneously, offers a decentralised solidarism that transcends the unitary power of the art world's established public and private bodies. The DIY doxa, then, functions as a shared ethic, one that has underwritten the values of much contemporary artistic practice since the late 1960s. Its viral nature has ensured that it continues to unbundle territories, facilitating exchange with internationalist ARIs around the world. The development of this doxa is a key reason why, in the 1970s, Tom Nairne's Scottish International Institute could anticipate a future neomedieval Scotland that was, simultaneously, internally decentralised and externally globalised.

In the late '60s, such values were often at odds with those sanctioned by the state and with those of the art market. The former is more overtly mandated by top-down arts policy, while the latter is negotiated between retailers and consumers. The DIY doxa, by contrast, was prosumerist; the producers were their own audience. However, this doxa was, and remains, a financial ouroboros, a potlatch or inextinguishable debt; the only way artists can escape cyclical self-subsidy is to access state subsidy or the art market. Given that Scotland's contemporary art market had been dilapidated, securing state support for this grassroots infrastructure became the overriding preoccupation.

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It is no coincidence that this concurred with rising pressure on the British Government to devolve more political office to Scotland. Conceding to the ACGB's Scottish Committee's long-running campaign to run SAC in Edinburgh was an opportune sop to cultural nationalism that ensured political office remained in Whitehall. Devolution meant that, in Scotland, two conflicting, and overlapping, forms of artistic governance came to coexist: the DIY doxa of grassroots self-determination and the British model of 'devolution': limited delegated authority temporarily granted by a centralised authority. In the early '70s at least, emerging artists tended to identify with the former, more established academicians with the latter. While the two distinct forms of artistic governance frequently conflicted, they were, and remain, interdependent. Over the past 50 years, for every soupçon of self-determination won by artists, there has been a concession of autonomy in exchange for 'stability'. For every attempt made by SAC to canonise contemporary art, there has been a maverick independent intervention. By way of illustration, I will now turn to a few dates in the history of the devolution of the visual arts in Scotland since the advent of SAC: 1971, 1979, 1992, 1999 and 2014. In each instance, I will sketch the struggle playing out between the international DIY doxa and the Keynesian model of devolution granted, with great reluctance, by the British Union State.

1971

The rise of the ARI collectivist doxa overlapped with the slow establishment of SAC's Glasgow Arts Centre. SAC began curating a room in the Glasgow

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Lady Artists' Club in Blythswood Square in 1967. It mainly exhibited touring exhibitions, dispatched by the ACGB, to educate provincial Scots.

Blythswood Square was a slice of Cork Street 'civilisation' in deepest darkest Glasgow. (It had a Cona Coffee Maker and served egg and cress sandwiches.) In 1971, the Lady Artists' Club declared bankruptcy, so SAC bought the building from them for £35,000. On 9 February 1971, SAC held a 'talk-in' there. The Glasgow League of Artists proposed to requisition the building as a rentable gallery and printmakers' workshop for local artisans and act 'democratically' as its 'advisory committee' (i.e. to establish the New 57 doxa in Glasgow).

SAC, instead, decided to invite a live-in director to take care of the building and to programme events for Glasgow in Glasgow. They appointed the visionary *International Times* editor and playwright Tom McGrath, who also found time to write plays and establish the Tron theatre while directing what, in 1974, became Third Eye Centre. McGrath patronised younger Scottish artists while bringing a wide array of intermedia into Third Eye's programme, developing this along similar lines to the European-Joseph-Beuys-Postminimalist lineage that, by 1970, had many artist advocates in Edinburgh. He introduced Glasgow to photo/video community studios, muralism and American forms of social practice informed by field trips to New York and Chicago. Such forms of artistic activity was actively discouraged by the academicians teaching in Scotland's four art schools.

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In spite of this confident self-determination, the textbook Keynesian attitude at SAC remained that Scotland had suffered from a modernist bypass and their role was to give it a crash course. The Second Earl Haig of SAC wrote to McGrath regarding his proposed inaugural programme of 1974 that 'there should be no difficulty in enabling Glasgow viewers to have the opportunity of absorbing and learning some of the main trends. Apart from Rennie McIntosh [sic.] there doesn't seem to be any items in your list which cover this sort of thing. Joan Eardley and Stanley Spencer, though good artists, are not part of any of the main movements which I have in mind'.⁴

Thus, the blinkered monoculturalism of the Bloomsbury Group continued to patronise and suppress Scotland's contemporary artists. When SAC part-funded ARIs, such as New 57, it did so reluctantly. Compared to its own venues and those run by Richard Demarco, New 57 received a pittance. This was not because Demarco's ARI was more effectively networked but because Demarco – as an accountable quasi-commercial gallerist in the Cork Street tradition – represented forms of continuity and advocacy recognisable to SAC. In this sense, SAC supported organisations that mirrored ACGB's Bloomsbury values. It dismissed the movement among younger artists in '70s Scotland to embrace the reciprocal nature of art's gift economy as an expression of the customary solidarism of the 'Scots Cellar'.⁵ This risk aversion did not pay off. It was New 57, Transmission and Collective, not

⁴ Dawyck Haig, Letter to Tom McGrath, 20th August 1973. (Third Eye Centre Archive, CCA/ Glasgow School of Art.)

⁵ FM McNeill, *The Scots Cellar: Its Traditions and Lore* (Edinburgh: Reprographia, 1973).

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Demarco or the NGS, that spearheaded what became Scotland's first home-grown international art movement since Art Nouveau, the New Image.

1979

SAC Director Alexander Dunbar had high hopes that the devolution referendum of 1979 would make SAC directly answerable to Edinburgh's New Parliament House. He wrote: 'My guess is that the Government will decide that the arts will be devolved to Scotland, partly because it makes sense and goes with related functions, and partly because both main parties are so scared of giving Scotland real economic power that they will compensate by giving Scotland everything except real economic power'.⁶ However, an ACGB-inspired lack of trust in artists (and, more generally, in the ability of Scotti to directly govern their culture) intensified throughout the 1970s and, with the failure of the first Scottish Referendum to deliver devolution, into the '80s.

In the late '70s, SAC increased pressure on New 57 to appoint and pay an 'accountable' director and ratify a more linear management structure. By the early '80s, New 57 were in talks to merge with SAC-run Fruit Market Gallery in Edinburgh to form the independent Fruitmarket. In 1984, part of the New 57 committee, led by Jim Birrell, narrowly voted to merge. Dissenting New 57 members were supported by Iain Patterson, who, in the same year, formed Collective on the basis of the original '57 constitution. Fruitmarket

⁶ Alexander Dunbar, *Devolution and the Scottish Arts Council* (Edinburgh: SAC, 19 February 1975), p. 16. (Third Eye Centre Archive, CCA/Glasgow School of Art.)

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quickly appointed a director and abandoned its artist committee forever, proving the Collective group's mistrust legitimate.

When McGrath departed Glasgow, artists in the city were given fewer opportunities to exhibit as Third Eye attempted to be more 'international' (which meant a return to imported touring exhibitions). Artistic disgruntlement led to consultation with members of New 57 in Edinburgh, and this, in turn, birthed Glasgow's Transmission Committee for the Visual Arts in 1983. Throughout the '80s, it was Transmission that negotiated Glasgow's entry into the international art world; Third Eye shivered in its shadow.

1992

Ten years later, SAC civil servants attempted to strong-arm Transmission and Collective to appoint a paid 'accountable' director. They withdrew funding from both ARIs in a bid to make them acquiesce. Collective, with high rents and little support from Edinburgh Council, was forced to appoint a director in 1992. Transmission held out, and, during the 'Scotia Nostra' period of the early 1990s⁷ in which its international reputation skyrocketed, it won its battle with SAC. In the early '00s, Collective replaced its committee with a board, the preferred structure of SAC. Ironically, while SAC was still insisting on top-down accountability, ACGB was being disbanded. In 1994, SAC was

⁷ Moira Jeffrey, *Generation: 25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland and Glasgow Life, 2014).

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devolved to the Scottish Office, thus gaining a greater degree of authority.

Transmission's small victory over SAC, and the recognition this bestowed upon them from the international art world, demonstrated the power of the commonwealth; this provided a largesse greater than any individual or organisation could return to it. Throughout the 1990s, artists based in Scotland consistently practised the DIY doxa, establishing their own infrastructure and only seeking public support after having built a considerable international reputation. Notably in Glasgow, Patricia Fleming established a range of studio and exhibition projects through her FUSE programme that were pivotal to the rise of Glasgow as an international visual arts centre. She did this on a shoestring, exploiting John Major's changes to Unemployment Benefits to the benefit of her peers.

1999

By the time the Scottish Parliament reconvened in 1999, SAC had been devolved for 32 years and free of the ACGB for five years. The end of the millennium did not herald any further cultural devolution of arts governance within Scotland; on the contrary. Most of the 1999 Scottish Election manifestos (excepting that of Labour) were critical of arm's-length bodies (ALBs). Keynes' arm's-length model was first revoked by the 1999 Lib-Lab Scottish Executive who were determined to make SAC an executive body of government. The number of Scottish ALBs has since been purposefully and substantially reduced. One ALB that was axed was SAC, disbanded in 2010.

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The zombie brainchild of New Labour, Creative Scotland (CS) is a different beast – a patron state that rejects Arnoldian conceptions of culture and one that is far less accountable to the public. CS makes no distinction between different art forms seeking Open Project Funding, nor does it distinguish between individual artists and large organisations. For example, CS's current 10-Year Plan, *Unlocking Potential Embracing Ambition*, places a great deal of emphasis on the 'learning organisation'; on enabling audiences to establish the parameters of social practice and their own creative hubs, while actively developing their own infrastructure.

Superficially, this sounds like an endorsement of an anthropological, democratic and devolved approach to culture. However, CS has heightened SAC's centrist managerial approach. Only the foundational discourse differs in its totalising instrumentalism. So, where SAC recognised distinct and specific artistic practices (and privileged a highly developed, if rather naturalised, modernist theory of 'practice'), CS is concerned with entirely generic corporatisms such as 'development needs', 'advocacy' and 'influencing'. The cult of personalities and impresarios that dominated SAC in the '70s has been superseded not by transparent 'systems', but by the cult of quantitative 'evidence-based' managerialism. SAC saw the visual arts (and artists) as wild things that needed to be sensibly nurtured (infantilised) if they were to blossom. CS, by contrast, imagines the visual arts to be, incontestably, part of the cultural industries, the key objective of which is

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'culturepreneurial' wealth creation.⁸ CS has thus economised culture rather than encultured the economy. Its goal of 'enabling audiences' (rather than artists or arts organisations), is a familiar euphemism for enthroning consumer choice.

Buried deep within the DNA of CS, and the New Labour project from which it arose, is structuration theory. According to Anthony Giddens' account of structuration, everyone must become their own system. Certainly, as I have outlined here, the international development of contemporary art since the late '60s may be understood as a history of artists forming a wide range of formal and informal organisations. Partly as a means of survival and partly for artistic reasons, artists have de-centred themselves in favour of very broad meshworks.

Structuration is a rich and complex theory, and, in the right hands, can help us understand how ARIs might be catalysts for genuine cultural devolution (as opposed to mere 'creative economics'). However, in a largely rudderless instrument of governance such as CS – one oblivious to its own origins and goals – it has proven disastrous. (It is notable that the Creative England experiment was swiftly abandoned by Labour's Department for Culture, Media and Sport.) The role of centripetal organisations such as CS and the NGS – arguably incompatible with a structuration-based approach to culture – remains unquestioned by the Scottish Government, despite the fact that

⁸ Anthony Davies and Simon Ford, 'Art Futures', *Art Monthly* 223, 1999, p. 9–11.

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everything that is vital and celebrated about art in Scotland since the late '60s has emerged from self-devolved organisations and infrastructures.

2014

In spite of the CS debacle, the YES Scotland campaign was very visibly supported by artists in Scotland. This attests to its cell-like organisational approach, which drew both systemically and ethically upon the DIY doxa. National Collective – the cultural movement for Scottish independence during Scotland's Referendum from December 2011 to September 2014 – explicitly established this connection, signing up more than 4,000 members across the country. While the YES campaign ultimately lost the referendum to the Unionist NO vote, it decisively won the cultural crusade, embedding the DIY doxa into a mainstream national imaginary that has long included constitutional solidarism (Scots are sovereign, not the Scottish Parliament).

Meanwhile, offering no alternative to the viral DIY doxa, authoritarian British nationalism amplifies neorealist fantasies of territorial order, strength and stability. Luckily, artists in Scotland, as elsewhere in the world, continue to establish their own 'learning organisations' and forms of self-governance as they have consistently over the past 50 years (e.g. The Edinburgh Annuale, Open House Glasgow).

Advocates of Scottish independence – such as the SNP, Green Party and Common Weal – have drawn much sustenance from Nordic models of social democracy. They would be as well served by examining why the DIY doxa

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impetus continues to gather a groundswell of support in contemporary Scottish cultural politics, and they will learn much from the ever-evolving forms it takes. The question of how a centripetal statelet such as Scotland (independent or not) might dissolve its national arts bodies in order to redistribute public resources towards self-evolving organisations and user-generated infrastructures in the arts is a thornier one. As The Jimmy Reid Foundation has demonstrated, in policing and local government, Scotland is now less devolved than it was before 1999. The fact that Scotland's patron state for the arts (CS) is also more singular and centralised now than it was in 1994, some years prior to political devolution, is no cause for celebration. History clearly demonstrates that the Union State's preoccupation with centralisation – under the ACGB and in SAC's early years – failed to nurture emerging artistic practice.

There is little point in Scotland running its own affairs if it uses its powers merely to establish tartanised versions of the British Union State's administrative apparatus – a Unionist-Nationalist trope that runs consistently from the early 19th century through Scotland's arts organisations: RSE, RSA, NGS, SAC... Devolution in the arts means fully entrusting them to interdependent communities of practice and communities of interest, something that ARIs such as SPACE have long embodied constitutionally. Culture is the infinite diversity of absolute opacities. Total noise in the channel. It has no centre as such; it is a Republic of Static.